

Patterns in sense making interactions

How people make sense of
kidney failure in online renal
discussion groups

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Certificate of Authorship / Originality

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the text.

Signature of Candidate

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Table of Contents

Certificate of Authorship / Originality	iii
Acknowledgements	v
List of Illustrations	xiii
List of Tables.....	xiv
Abstract	xv
Glossary	xvii
Definition of key terms used in this analysis	xix
 Chapter One: Introduction.....	 1
1.1 My approach to the study of sense making	3
1.2 Kidney failure as a setting for sense making.....	5
Description of the discussion groups	8
Differences between the groups	11
1.3 Overview of the thesis	13
Notes about wording	16
Conclusion	17
 Chapter Two: What we know about sense making	 19
2.1 What is sense making?	21
Dervin's Sense-Making Theory.....	23
Sense making in the LIS literature.....	25
Treatment of sense making across the disciplines	27
A definition of sense making	27
The faculties involved in sense making	30
The mind	30
Emotions	31
The body	32
With or without words?.....	34
Individual, collaborative and social sense making.....	35
Power	36
The start of sense making: gaps, chaos, uncertainty	38
Time	39
Connections between sense making and the wider LIS literature.....	40
Methods and research perspectives	40
2.2 Making sense of illness	42
Sense-making-related themes in the illness literature	44
Power(lessness).....	45
Physicality	47
New themes specific to illness	47
Methods and research perspectives	48
2.3 Making sense in online discussion groups	49
Contributions to sense making theory	50
Emotional and Informational support	50
Social dynamics	52
Methods and research perspectives	53

2.4 Summary of gaps in the literature.....	54
Methods and research perspectives.....	55
Conclusion.....	56
Chapter Three: Methodology and Methods	57
3.1 Theoretical perspective.....	59
Sense-Making	59
Social sense making.....	60
Ethnomethodology.....	61
Studying text	63
Opening out the research agenda	65
3.2 Locating the research.....	67
Online discussion groups	67
Ethical issues.....	69
Approaches to ethics in online research	69
Ethical approach of this project.....	70
Data gathering: Participatory fieldwork.....	72
My presence in the field	74
Sensitive research.....	75
3.3 Research question.....	77
3.4 Methods	79
Data analysis.....	80
Analytical focus.....	80
Sequential Charts.....	84
3.5 Overview of the Methodology.....	86
Methodological Limitations.....	87
Limitations of the data.....	87
Limitations in the analysis.....	88
Methodological contribution.....	90
Conclusion.....	92
Chapter Four: Data Analysis and Findings	95
4.1 Patterns in content - what people say	97
Content analysis of posts	97
Data selection	97
Findings.....	98
4.2 Thematic analysis of interactional norms	101
Who can speak and listen (be renal).....	102
Support one another (be community).....	103
Speak freely (join in).....	104
Be positive and determined (don't give up)	105
4.3 Patterns in sequences – how and when things are said.....	107
Establishing sequential patterns.....	108
Charting local thematic patterns.....	109
Creating the local thematic charts	109
Development of content-related consensus	115
Development of emotional consenses	116
Shifting tones.....	116
Joining and shifting consenses	117

Using tones to select meanings	118
Meaning building beyond threads.....	120
Multiple consenses and the link to experience.....	121
Overviews of three ‘typical’ threads.....	122
Charting patterns in the ‘themes of format’	124
Provision of information	128
Provision of support.....	130
4.4 Examining deviant data	132
Analysis of an argument	139
Emotional tones.....	142
References to interactional norms in Thread H.....	144
4.5 Summary of findings	147
First analysis: content analysis of posts from a week of data.....	147
Second analysis: thematic analysis of interactional norms.....	148
Third analysis: sequential analysis of eight threads	148
Sequential analysis consistent with content analysis	149
Sequential analysis consistent with interactional norms.....	149
Chapter Five: Patterns	151
5.1 Repetition	153
Approximate repetition.....	153
Seeing similarity	154
Reproducing similarity.....	155
Normality	158
Normality (in the world out there)	158
Norms.....	159
My normal.....	160
Comparing oneself to norms and consenses	161
Right emotions	164
Humour	166
5.2 Difference	169
Time	169
Changing bodies, changing understandings.....	172
Dissonant voices	175
Iterative changes (shifting meanings)	176
Conclusion	180
Chapter Six: Experiential Brutality	181
6.1 Making sense of experience	183
Physicality (for example).....	183
The physical experiences of kidney failure.....	185
Cyborg body.....	186
Experiential brutality	186
Everyone is different	188
Measurements	189
Experiential authority	190
Learning from other’s experiences.....	190
Experiential authority in the sequential analysis.....	191
Experiential authority in the interactional norms.....	191

Experiential authority in the content analysis	192
6.2 Iterative rounds	196
The mangle of all kinds of experience	200
6.3 Taking and losing control	202
Taking control	202
Knowing <i>about</i>	202
Longitudinal and specific knowings	203
Workarounds	204
Knowing <i>how</i>	205
Flexibility	206
Losing control	207
The limits of controllability	207
Accommodation: a constantly renegotiated peace	209
Conclusion	210
Chapter Seven: Complexity	213
7.1 Living in ecologies of meaning	215
The garden of possibilities	215
New sense from old	217
Casting nets to catch sense: sense-mades as improvised networks of meaning	217
Knowing is created in company	219
Connecting from generalities to specifics	220
7.2 Finding gaps	222
Gaps ‘between’	223
Gaps between experience and explanation	224
Gaps between explanation and understanding	226
Gaps ‘within’	228
Gaps within knowing	228
Gaps within experience	229
Gaps within reality	229
Sense unmaking	230
7.3 Structure verses flux	232
Unstructured structures	233
Useful looseness	235
Improvised knowings	239
Learning to live with gap	240
Conclusion	241
Chapter Eight: Implications	245
8.1 The implications of pattern making	246
Implications of pattern making for researchers	246
The role of emotions in sense making	246
Implications of pattern making for clinicians	247
Time and repetition	247
Help with developing emotional patterns	249
Discontinuity in care	250
8.2 The implications of experiential brutality	251
Implications of experiential brutality for researchers	251

Implications of experiential brutality for clinicians.....	252
Experience as teacher.....	252
Experience as enforcer.....	253
Patient as an information source.....	253
Peer guidance.....	254
Patient as collaborator.....	254
8.3 The implications of complexity.....	256
Implications of complexity for researchers.....	257
Practice theory.....	259
Implications of complexity for clinicians.....	260
From generics to specifics.....	260
Enlarging the field of possibilities.....	262
Sources for the field of possibilities.....	263
Peers.....	263
Peers online.....	264
Household members.....	265
8.4 Patient training.....	268
Limitations of training.....	271
Implications for Information professionals.....	272
Conclusion.....	275
Chapter Nine: Conclusion.....	277
9.1 Contributions to research.....	278
Contributions to sense making theory.....	279
Patterns and structures.....	281
Multiple understandings.....	281
Socially enacted authority-making.....	282
Emotions and physicality.....	283
Time.....	284
Retrospection versus planning.....	284
Normality.....	285
Shifting from Gap to connections.....	285
Sense making assemblages may not manifest as narratives.....	287
Everyday sense making cues and plausibility.....	288
No predictive variables.....	289
9.2 Limitations of the study.....	289
9.3 Future research.....	291
Conclusion.....	294
Appendix A: Data for analysis of interactional norms.....	297
Selections from <i>Welcome</i> pages at group websites.....	297
Selections from <i>rules for posting</i> threads.....	298
Examples of <i>Welcome</i> posts.....	299
Appendix B: Confidential Data for Sequential analysis of threads.....	301
Thread A: Enough.....	301
Thread B: I AM BORG.....	307
Thread C: Stint Removal.....	311

Thread D: Using Blunt needles	315
Thread E: Transplants [Text not included].....	320
Thread F: [Text not included].....	320
Thread G: Major Rant. Do not read if you are in a good mood	320
Thread H: [Text not included]	327
 Appendix C: Coding frames.....	 329
Criteria for top eight themes	329
Coding themes related to control:.....	329
 References	 331

List of Illustrations

Figure 2.1: Comparative focus of sense making papers in LIS and Organisation studies	22
Figure 2.2: Comparative distribution of research perspectives and methods in the sense making literature.....	41
Figure 3.1: screen shot of one of my posts, showing my profile information in KidneyKorner.....	72
Figure 3.2: Layered approach to the data analysis.....	82
Figure 4.1: Incidence of eight most frequently coded themes in posts	100
Figure 4.2: Comparative incidence of the eight top themes, between groups	101
Figure 4.3: Close up from the analysis of Thread A ('Enough')	111
Figure 4.4: Overview analysis of Thread A ('Enough')	113
Figure 4.5: Overview of Thread A ('Enough')	114
Figure 4.6: Close up from the analysis of Thread A ('Enough'): responses to dependency on a machine	115
Figure 4.7: Creation of Row 27 from rows related to <i>giving it time</i> in Thread A ('Enough').....	115
Figure 4.8: Tone from the analysis of Thread A ('Enough')	116
Figure 4.9: Tonal shift in Thread A ('Enough').....	117
Figure 4.10: Tone from the analysis of Thread B ('I AM BORG').....	117
Figure 4.11: Close up from the analysis of Thread A ('Enough'): responses to dependency on a machine	118
Figure 4.12: Excerpts from the analysis of Thread A ('Enough')	118
Figure 4.13: Tonal shift in Thread C ('Stint Removal')	122
Figure 4.14: Simplified chart of local themes in Thread A ('Enough').....	123
Figure 4.15: Simplified charts of local themes for Threads A, B and C.....	124
Figure 4.16: Charts showing themes of format for Thread A.....	126
Figure 4.17: Chart showing themes of format for Threads B and C.....	127
Figure 4.18: Excerpt from Thread C ('Stint Removal') showing discussion of experiences	129
Figure 4.19: Use of humour and exploration of fistulas as strange, in Thread B ('I AM BORG')	131
Figure 4.20: Simplified charts for Thread D, split into four subthreads	133
Figure 4.21: Simplified chart for Thread E ('Transplants').....	134
Figure 4.22: Tones from the analysis of Thread E ('Transplants').....	135
Figure 4.23: Juxtaposition of selected tones and content from the analysis of Thread E ('Transplants').....	135
Figure 4.24: Simplified charts for Threads F and G	136
Figure 4.25a: Threads D and E, showing patterns in themes of format.....	137
Figure 4.25b: Threads F and G, showing patterns in themes of format.....	138
Figure 4.26: Thread H ([argument]) showing repeated themes in tones and content	140
Figure 4.27: Thread H ([argument]): patterns in themes of format	140
Figure 4.28: Thread H ([argument]): indicating sections of the discussion.....	141
Figure 4.29: Thread H ([argument]) indicating consenses.....	141
Figure 4.30: Thread H ([argument]): close up of rows showing emotional tones in posts ...	142
Figure 4.31: Thread H ([argument]): close up of rows showing agreement / disagreement with Person H.....	142
Figure 4.32: Close up from the analysis of Thread H ([argument]) comparing "camps" of with supporters or ideas	144
Figure 4.33: Thread H ([argument]): content related themes versus discussion of interactional norms.....	144
Figure 4.34: Thread H ([argument]): close up of rows related to finding being realistic ...	145

Volume Two: Chapters 5-9

Figure 6.1: Attributions of power / authority in posts	198
Figure 6.2: Attributions of information / help / support in posts.....	200
Figure 6.3: Relations driving iterative rounds in sense making	203
Figure 6.4: IHateDialysis patient contributor taking his portable dialysis machine rafting	213
Figure 6.5: AustralianDialysisBuddies patient-contributor 'planking' on his home dialysis machine	216
Figure 7.1: Relations driving iterative rounds in sense making	227
Figure 7.2: Gaps (loss of specificity) during denotation and signification	230
Figure 7.3: The co-related series of experience, description and sense, based on descriptions by Deleuze (2004b)	231

Volume Three: Appendices and References

Figure B.1: A fistula (the three lumps running along the length of the arm)	310
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List of Tables

Volume One: Chapters 1-4

Table 1.1: Comparison of prevalence of ESRD in selected countries.....	6
Table 1.2: Sources of data	10
Table 1.3: Location of active members	11
Table 2.1: Disciplines in which papers addressing sense making were found	21
Table 2.2: Papers relating to sense making from the health literature	43
Table 2.3: Coverage of themes relating to sense making	55
Table 3.1: Summary of key theoretical perspectives on sense making and implications for research.....	88
Table 4.1: Comparison of posting activity between the three groups	97
Table 4.2: Eight most frequently coded themes in posts	98
Table 4.3: Example of multiple coding for a single post	99
Table 4.4: Connections between interactive norms and frequently occurring themes	106
Table 4.5: Summary of all threads included in the sequential analysis.....	109
Table 4.6: Comparative incidence of themes of format in Threads A, B and C	128

Volume Two: Chapters 5-9

Table 9.1: My contribution to themes relating to sense making	281
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Abstract

Sense making matters because people make sense to understand situations and decide what to do next. Researchers study sense making to understand why space programs fail, why employees resist change, how doctors make diagnoses and how patients cope with experiences and care for themselves. Yet in Library and Information Studies (LIS), sense making research mainly restricts itself to how people interact with information systems. Sense making is rarely defined in any field, but is generally described as a cognitive activity, ignoring potential emotional or experiential aspects of sense making. My aim with this research is to define sense making and extend LIS conceptions of sense making to include *whatever might be involved*, whether cognitive or not and looking beyond the involvement of information systems.

I examined people making sense of kidney failure, a likely situation in which to perceive physicality and emotions in sense making. This thesis has several methodological components including influences by two major sense making theorists, Brenda Dervin and Karl Weick. Based on their insight, I conceive sense making as social, ongoing, enactive processes. Influenced by ethnomethodological descriptions of how meanings emerge in interactions, I participated in online renal support groups, following interactions *en vivo*. Influenced by practice theory, I view activities as evidence of sense making, and examine discussion posts as written sense making. Therefore I describe external performances of sense making, not internal psychological understandings. The result is a longitudinal, social constructionist investigation of text-based sense making interactions, using content and thematic analyses to attend to collaborative sequences.

I found that people collaborated online by developing and breaking patterns of ideas and emotional tones, requiring repetition and time. They connected discussions to their own lives, interrelating feelings, ideas and experiences. Also, they created customized, personalised understandings, improvising shifting connections which allowed them to respond to complexity.

These findings confirm conceptions both of sense making as located in time, and as embodied, emotional and lived, not only a mental activity. They also contribute to conceptions of knowing as flexible and transient rather than stable and structured. These are shifts from common LIS conceptions of sense making and knowledge. This thesis describes the important practical implications for clinicians and information professionals that follow from these significant conceptual shifts, demonstrating the practical relevance of having looked beyond information-related data to extend LIS conceptions of sense making.

Glossary

- Dialysis : Treatment for renal failure in which the blood is cleaned and fluid removed by mechanical means
- Dialysor : Term used by some renal patients to replace the term ‘patient’ (Peckham 2008): a person who receives dialysis as a treatment to replace lost kidney function.
- ESRD : End Stage Renal Disease, a classification applied to patients who have less than 15% kidney function.
- Fistula : an access for haemodialysis, in which an enlarged vein is created by surgically joining a vein and an artery, often in the forearm.
- Haemodialysis : A treatment for kidney failure in which the patient’s blood is pumped through special tubing to a haemodialysis machine. The machine acts like a kidney, filtering waste products from the blood before returning it to the patient (Kidney Health Australia 2011b).
- HD : See *haemodialysis*
- LIS : Library and Information Studies
- Lurker : Someone who reads online discussions without writing posts.
- Nephrology : The study of renal medicine
- Nephrologist : A specialist in renal medicine
- PD : See *peritoneal dialysis*
- Peritoneal dialysis : A treatment for kidney failure where dialysis fluid is moved in and out of the peritoneal cavity to remove wastes and fluid from the blood (Kidney Health Australia 2011b).
- Renal : Relating to the kidneys
- Renal replacement therapies : Treatments for kidney failure, either transplant or dialysis

Definition of key terms used in this analysis

- Consenses : I describe textual, not cognitive consenses. In so doing, I do not argue that all contributors thought alike or agreed, but that text in a thread contained themes that were repeated and reused in recognisably similar ways. I usually talk about consenses in the plural because a single consensus in a thread was rare.
- Repetition : I use the term *repetition* not in the sense of *perfectly repeated experiences*, but as shorthand for reiteration, reuse of themes or ideas, the ways in which people loosely clump similar things together and the familiarity which results from recognising such loosely similar things over and over again.
- Sense : Meaning, that is, connections between ideas and/or feelings. Local or improvised knowings manifesting as understandings, theories or explanations.
- I sometimes interchangeably use the terms sense, understandings, theories, ‘sense-mades’ and explanations.
- Sense making : Making transiently coherent connections; improvising networks of meaningful elements; micro-processes of coherent meaning making with reference to situated reality, including orienting oneself for action.
- Tones : The emotions that a reader might imagine the contributor of a post to have been expressing through their text. In this analysis, the tones I describe are manifestations of emotions in messages as they appeared to me as a member-insider. I do not presume to know what emotions were actually felt by contributors.

